

2019

Riding the City: Renegade Spaces of Street BMX

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Riding the City: Renegade Spaces of Street BMX

An undergraduate thesis submitted in partial completion of College Honors

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May 2019

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Acknowledgments

This project would not have been possible without the guidance and support of my advisor, professor Meghan Cope, and also professor Luis Vivanco who helped teach me how to craft an undergraduate level paper. I would also like to thank UVM's Geography department, which has provided me the skills and resources that I needed to take on this project. Finally, I would also like to thank, Arron who graciously agreed to talk with me about street riding for many hours, and provided some key insights into this research.

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Abstract

Street BMX riders are transgressive actors within urban spaces who, through their riding, *rescript* social and spatial meanings within the city. My goal here is to unpack how riders subvert the dominant social and spatial order of urban space through their riding. I argue that riders challenge the assumed ‘order’ of the city, expose social and spatial boundaries, (re)interpret the spaces in which they ride, and ultimately *(re)make* space through riding and making videos to capture their performances.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The sixteen-year-old boy, Justin Gautreau, rides his BMX bike around in a short circuit; eyeing up the twenty concrete stairs proceeding below him. Justin is attempting to ride the infamous street BMX “spot”, El Toro, which is a non-descript set of stairs located at El Toro high school in California. He has already attempted, and failed, a tail whip trick where he spins his entire bike around underneath him in mid-air. His arm is bloody from the brutal crash he suffered on his first go. He has no protective padding on, or even a helmet; his flat brimmed hat flies off his head each time he tries to land the trick. His friends, his teammates, are all surrounding the landing zone, cameras rolling, and lights set up on tripods to capture the moment he lands the trick. On his third attempt, just before he takes off, a female security guard pulls in front of the stairs in a small golf cart. She immediately tries to get the group of riders to leave, but the riders insist that Justin get ‘one more try’. ‘You don’t understand’, the one cameraman says to the woman. ‘There are legal ramifications’ she shouts back, but the riders insist that they only need one more try and they will leave; ‘[He’s] come all the way from Louisiana to do this’ the cameraman says. ‘We have folks come from all over...there is a huge legal liability’ she retorts. After several back and forth exchanges with the security guard from the school, Justin runs down the stairs and drives the golf cart out of his landing zone, the guard screams on the radio for backup. Justin’s friends offer encouragement to him, and one steps in front of the cart to block it from coming forward again. Justin runs back up the stairs, ‘right here’ he says. He

takes one more run up, he totally ignores the woman screaming on the radio, screaming at him and his friends. Justin has a single focus in this moment: to land his trick. He powers down on the pedals, he launches off the edge of the stairs, plummeting twenty-five or more feet to the ground, and all while throwing his bike around underneath him 360-degrees. He lands the trick on his fourth attempt. As soon as he does, he friends erupt in celebration, the security guard is forgotten in the background; ‘We’re leaving, gladly!’ one shouts.



Figure 1.1 from Cult Crew (2016)

Landing this trick for Justin is a rite of passage in the BMX community. He has proved himself, proven his masculinity, through acceptance of pain, perseverance, and riding prowess. He earned his place on the street BMX “team” that he rides for. This stair set, and ‘spots’ (which is anything that can be ridden by street riders) across the globe are nexuses for almost exclusively young men to prove themselves to one another. However, where riders see a proving ground, mainstream society generally views spaces, such as El Toro high school in Figure 1.1, as safe, orderly, and predictable spaces. Riders challenge this dominant conception of space through

using that space in unexpected ways, and in so doing both reveal the assumed order of space while also (re)scripting that order. This is clearly evident in the example shown above with El Toro. The security guard shouts at the riders about the liability that the school takes on if they allow riders to use this space in such a way. However, as the riders shout back at her, she doesn't understand the importance of this space to them and why Justin has to do what he does. Here we see conflicting identities being practiced spatially; the security guard attempting to enforce order and safety, and the riders performing their renegade masculine identities on the stage of this stair set.

Justin's stunt was one of the first videos that I came across nearly three years ago when I first conceptualized of this project. I was captured by the renegade attitude and performative nature of their riding. Watching Justin, and other riders, continually place themselves into perilous situations struck a "geographic chord" within me in terms of how these riders were using space for the performance of their particular masculine identities and how this performance challenged the *expectations* that most of us non-riders have for how space, particularly urban space, should be used. Like the security guard featured above, we do not expect to see someone hurl themselves in front of us on a busy street corner, down a stairwell, or off a ledge all while performing a technical trick. In these moments of intersection between riders and non-riders the expectations of how space should be used are revealed because riders *subvert* those expectations and thus rescript the narrative of how space should or can be used by injecting creative and playful interpretations of space into their everyday movements through the city on their bikes. As my research on this topic progressed and I curated more and more of these types of subversive videos where riders would attack the urban order through their riding causing disruptions and

hostile interactions with pedestrians and security guards alike, I came to believe that *all* street riders were like the ones I was seeing in videos.

However, what I found out instead was that the majority of street riders are far less transgressive than the riding portrayed in online videos. Most riders are not challenging the urban “order” like the riders seen in videos, but are instead simply trying to go out and have fun with their friends. These average riders are far more likely to ride in designated skate parks that are now common in most cities and urban areas. These skate parks offer riders a chance to practice their tricks, progress their riding, and hangout with friends without being confronted by authorities or stymied by streets clogged by pedestrians. So I asked myself: are these online videos still *relevant*? And the answer to that is resoundingly, yes. While it is true that online street riding videos do not represent what most riders go out and do on a daily basis, the identities and actions portrayed and committed in these videos resonates with the average rider at home watching. In a way, the videos allow average riders to live vicariously through the riders in the videos who are far more transgressive than themselves. Average riders *want* to be like the riders that they see in the videos; just like the child at home shooting basketball in their driveway might idolize famous NBA players. While average riders do not transgress in the same way that riders in videos do, riding their bikes in skateparks allows average riders to feel connected to the riding that they see in videos. Riding in skateparks may also be safer for certain racialized groups that are targets for police brutality and increased scrutiny by the “public”. While my research cannot prove this possibility, I would speculate that riders of color would be less willing to ride in areas where they could be in danger, and choose to ride in skate parks for the relative safety they provide. What I can say is that many of the riders that I saw in the videos I watched were young white men and not people of color; however, this is not to say that street riding is not

popular among people of color, but rather, riders that appear on camera seem to be predominantly white, which could suggest that white riders feel more secure to transgress without fearing for their safety. Despite these videos not representing the majority of riders, they are still a powerful window into the street riding community. Street riding videos determine what is cool and “authentic” within the riding community, they influence the profusion of the sport across the globe, they inspire some riders to go out and ride the spots that they see in videos, and they create an appealing renegade image of what street BMX to consumers at home who find it entertaining or inspiring.

Adding to the nuance of how these videos inform the broader riding community, my research uncovers the ways in which riding videos are, in a way, an extension of the capitalist system that they, somewhat ironically, transgress upon. In my discussions with my key informant, Arron, I came to understand that online videos can be quite lucrative for their creators. Many videos attract a massive amount of views and many riders featured in these videos are sponsored by BMX bike brands as well as by other commercial sources. So, while these videos document young men subverting the capitalist system by breaking the rules and expectations of place, putting themselves in danger, causing disruptions within the city; they are intimately connected with this very same capitalist system. Videos can serve as a valuable source of income for some riders, or powerful marketing tool for BMX bicycle companies intent on selling bikes and merchandise. The transgression portrayed within videos often becomes the centerpiece of the video to entice viewers with “clickbait” that is advertised through the title of videos or the thumbnail, and this is especially prevalent in “vlog” style videos that focus on one particular rider and are typically seen as less “authentic” by riders like Arron. Arron explained to me that these videos that are centered around self promotion are generally seen as less authentic

and selfish because they use the sport for personal gain. Riders like Arron prefer videos that are about the riding and tricks rather than the individual. However, many of the YouTube videos that Arron himself pointed me to, while considered more authentic to some riders, were just another example of riding videos as tools of capital accumulation. What I saw in the videos and brands that Arron pointed me to were companies harnessing the transgressive and renegade image of street riding in order to generate views, gather a following, and sell bikes and merchandise. In this way, both vloggers that are looked down on by some riders like Arron and more “authentic” BMX companies are all benefiting from the the capitalist system that their videos transgress upon.

The city is an active participant in all of this because it often acts as the stage upon which these videos take place. However, the city as a space can’t be considered a static object that is simply acted *on* by riders. Rather, as my paper argues, riders and the city (co)create one another. The city plays a crucial part in creating street riding because without the rules and “order” that governs the city itself, street riding as a transgressive sport could not exist because without rules to break, transgression cannot occur. In turn, riders in videos use the spaces of the city in unexpected, creative, and playful ways that both challenge the rules of place but also then recreate the spaces in which the riding occurs. A bench that a rider might use for a trick can no longer be solely understood as a bench but rather, also, as a riding spot.

This thesis explores the ways in which street BMX riders engage with city and urban spaces in ways that expose the assumed order of that space. Riders, through moving through space in creative, playful, and disruptive ways, expose and challenge the boundaries and societal norms that are concretized into space itself. This paper will draw on a body of literature that illustrates how space is created as a means of control and domination partly to protect the

accumulation of wealth and profit by the elite of society. Within this system there are winners and losers. Those who are deemed 'unproductive' to the capitalist agenda, like street riders, are cast out of mainstream society, because their actions, or even their presence alone, in space is considered to be a symbolically violent offense against the dominant order of society (Cresswell, 1996). The construction of space is unequal both in terms of its construction and how it is policed. Riders not only unearth these inequalities, present in space, but they also work to (re)script this 'order' through their unorthodox ways of moving through space. From these notions several key questions arise: 1) in what ways do street BMX riders (re)script the 'order' of the city, and 2) how does the city work to (re)create street riding? Through answering these questions, I will argue that because riders use city spaces for play and creativity they expose the assumed "order" of the city, which is constructed by, and for, the benefit of the capitalist system. The second facet of my argument is that the city and street BMX (co)create each other in a dialectical fashion.

Chapter 2: The Unequal Construction of Space

In order to begin to answer the above research questions I must first consult the body of work on how society has created space in profoundly unequal ways. For this I will primarily be relying on Edward Soja's (1980) work on the social-spatial process, which deals with how society creates space and how that constructed space (re)creates society. However, this space is coded with a distinct set of ideals that create winners and losers, which I will expand upon using the work of Don Mitchell (1995). Finally, I will explain the ways in which the unequal 'order' of society can be (re)scripted through transgressive (Cresswell, 1996), and often playful (Flusty, 2000), uses of that space.

The social-spatial dialectic is a cornerstone theory of modern urban geographic thought, explaining that society creates physical and social space, and in turn these spaces shape social action within and upon them (Soja, 1980).

[S]pace itself may be primordially given, but the organization, use, and meaning of space is a product of social translation, transformation and experience. Socially produced space is a created structure comparable to other social constructions resulting from the transformation of given conditions inherent in life-on-earth, in much the same way that human history represents a social transformation of time and temporality. (Soja 1980; 210)

Edward Soja's (1980) work offers a sharp critique of traditional Marxist discourse surrounding the relationship between society and space, which, he argues, fails to "appreciate the essentially *dialectical* character of this relationship" (Soja 1980; 208). Marxian spatial analysis tended to overlook the "mix of opposition, unity, and contradiction which defines the *social-spatial dialectic*" because this would divert focus away from discussions of class conflict (Soja 1980; 208). Marxists argue against the 'fetishism' of space, and instead view space and society as separate actors that do not (re)create one another (Soja 1980). However, "the social and the spatial are so thoroughly imbued with each other's presence that their analytical separation

quickly becomes a misleading exercise” (Cresswell 1996; 11). Marxist spatial analysis falls short in its inability to realize that socially produced space is an ever-evolving organism that is sensitive to societal input: as society changes the organization and meaning of space, space also changes the way society acts within that space (Soja, 1980). Without this fundamental understanding of the socio-spatial dialectic, Marxist analysis of space, Soja argues is seriously weakened (Soja, 1980).

Much has changed since Soja (1980) first conceptualized of the socio-spatial process. Feminist Marxist critiques of space have taken this original work on space and improved upon it greatly. For example, Doreen Massey (2013) considers how place is *produced*, in an iterative process, by the multitudes of identities that meet within that place. Massey’s (2013) contributions to notions of place construction will be helpful to keep in mind later in this paper as I discuss the construction of space as riders and other actors, such as security guards, *perform* their particular identities in that place. This is not to say, however, that we cannot glean important insight from a Marxian spatial analysis. Rather we must understand its inherent focus, and therefore bias, towards class conflict as opposed to the more nuanced understanding of the dialectic between society and space which creates winners and losers. As Marxism would tell us, the production of space in the US is carried out by the political and economic elite to facilitate consumption, to maximize profit, and to streamline movement through the city for the comfort and convenience of the middle and upper classes (Harvey, 1989; Smith, 1996, 98). Therefore, the power to influence the production of space is distributed in uneven ways, framing certain (elite) groups as “the public” while marginalizing social groups as ‘Others’ who have little say in the layout, priorities, or organization of space (Mitchell, 1995).

Space is a useful tool that elites can use to define and dominate groups that do not belong in “the public” (Mitchell, 1995). Homeless people are an example of a group who paradoxically do not belong to “the public” yet always can be found within “public spaces”. Don Mitchell’s (1995) work focusing on People’s Park in Berkeley, paints two very different images of who constitutes “the public” and can therefore exist within “public space.” The Park became a place of tension between the political and economic elite comprised of Berkeley city, the University of California (UC), and local merchants who were actively trying to redevelop the Park in order to make it safer, more organized, and more useful to certain groups (Mitchell 1995). Prior to this the Park had always been a place where homeless people had congregated, and no one but city officials seemed to have a problem with this (Mitchell, 1995). However, once UC took control of the park they assured people that they “had every intention of maintaining People’s Park as a park. But it would be a park in which *inappropriate activities*— ‘the criminal element’ in the University’s words—would be removed to make room for student and middle-class residents” (emphasis added, Mitchell 1995; 110). What was at issue here was the image that the City officials including the University had of the park. Homeless people did not fit within the image of who belonged within the Park and were therefore allowed to use it (Mitchell, 1995). The City’s view of who constituted the public came in stark contrast to the vision of the Park that was promoted and fought for by students and activists trying to block the redevelopment of the Park (Mitchell, 1995). The opposition group was primarily concerned with the plan to convert the grassy area where homeless people congregated to volleyball courts in addition to the construction of pathways, public restrooms, and the installation of security lights (Mitchell, 1995). Activists and longtime users of the Park saw these planned developments as counter to the Park’s founding ideals. The image and values ascribed to the Park by local user groups were

those of a space for everyone to congregate free from “coercion by powerful institutions. For them, public space was an unconstrained space within which political movements can organize and expand into wider arenas” (Mitchell, 1995, 115). However, critics of the park argued that “the evident disorder of the Park invited criminality and excluded legitimate, ‘representative’ users” (Mitchell 1995; 110). City planners’ vision of the park

was one of open space for recreation and entertainment, subject to usage by an appropriate public that is allowed in. Public space thus constituted a controlled and orderly retreat where a properly behaved public might experience the spectacle of the city. In the first of these visions, public space is taken and remade by political actors; it is politicized at its very core; and it tolerates the risks of disorder (including recidivist political movements) as central to its functioning. In the second vision, public space is planned, orderly, and safe. Users of this space must be made to feel comfortable, and they should not be driven away by unsightly homeless people or unsolicited political activity (Mitchell, 1995, 115)

Mitchell argues that despite grandiose beliefs that public spaces in the United States model those of the Greek agora, groups who do not constitute “the public” are squeezed to the edges, alleys, and abandoned spaces of society. Indeed, the activists and homeless people who used People’s park “promoted a vision of a space marked by free interaction and the absence of coercion by powerful institutions. On the other hand, the goal of the City and UC was to create a space “for recreation and entertainment, subject to usage by an appropriate public that is *allowed* in. Public space thus constituted a controlled and orderly *retreat* where a properly behaved public might experience the spectacle of the city” (Mitchell 1995; 110). Homeless people and other marginalized groups are not given a space to occupy and, therefore, are always found to be “out of place” and forced to move along (Cresswell, 1996). People’s Park became a site of resistance in response to attempts by the City and UC to redevelop the part and push out the homeless groups living there. Homelessness, in its own way, is a form of transgression. While not politically motivated, the simple existence of homeless people in space presents an

unacceptable use of that space and, to the societal elite, symbolizes a violent transgression against property and order (Cresswell, 1996).

Unlike homeless people who are always in a social/spatial state of transgression, some actors purposefully transgress in order to resist the spatially constructed order of the city. This has two recursive effects: first, their transgressions against the order of the city frame their *identity* as a counter-hegemonic force, and, second, their transgressions reinterpret the *spaces* they use for resistance, simultaneously reinforcing their identities as a renegade or counter-culture group (Borden, 2001). Counter culture and other transgressive groups do not have the same political or economic capital of elites and so they must “use, manipulate and divert these spaces” in ways that (re)create the values that govern these landscapes. Societal elites often impose rules onto spaces in order to exclude transgressive groups, but for certain groups, the creation of these “no-go-zones” actually gives this “space a heightened symbolic significance” (Cresswell 1996; 163). Due to these no-go-zones, transgressive groups no longer need to break any laws other than simply existing within the space that they are excluded from. Ironically, however, “the unintended consequence of making space a means of control is to simultaneously make it a site of *meaningful resistance*” (emphasis added, Cresswell, 1996, 163). In this way, banning ‘undesirable’ groups, or certain activities, from space has the inverse effect of making their presence, and actions, in that space all the more transgressive, and gives these groups more power to protest their exclusion from society at large (Cresswell 1996). As Cresswell (1996) argues: “landscape is created by authors, and the end product attempts to create certain meanings. But also, like a book, the people who ‘read’ the landscape and its places can never be forced to read it in only one way” (Cresswell 1996; 13). It is those groups that ‘read’ the landscape in counter-hegemonic ways that are understood as transgressive and ‘out of place.’

Skate-boarders and parkour athletes can be considered counter-hegemonic groups through their uses of city spaces in ways that challenge an assumed order. Transgressive groups such as skate-boarders and parkour athletes are unique because, unlike activists using the streets for protest, which are often rooted in demands for inclusion in the democratic process, skate-boarders and parkour athletes seek to claim a space within the margins of society. Through this reclamation of space, they simultaneously create and embrace their counter-hegemonic standing in society. Borden et al. (2001) point out that skate-boarders choose to skate in less visible spaces, partly to avoid conflict, but also as “an attempt to write anew, not to change meaning but to insert a meaning where previously there was none” (Borden et al. 2001; 6). For example, skate-boarders target “something to do with safety, to do with everyday security, and turn it into an object of risk, where previously it was precisely risk that was being erased” (Borden et al. 2001; 10). Skate-boarding (especially skating in places where it is not allowed) has the two-fold ability to edit mainstream societal meaning of place, and also to reinforce the identities of skate-boarders as transgressive. Skate-boarders’ unorthodox use of space works to expose boundaries and principles that control society because it isn’t until a transgressive group exposes societal boundaries *through* transgression that the boundary is even noticed by society at large (Cresswell 1996). As Borden et al. (2001) argue “skateboarding...is a critical practice, challenging of both the form and political mechanics of urban life, and so in its own small way is part of this birth of differential space” (Borden et al. 2001; 2). Skate-boarders view the city in a fundamentally different way than other city user groups because space for skater-boarders “becomes a uniform entity, a constant layer through the city that can be utilized...as a surface on which to skate” in this view of the city landscape “all elements of the city are...reduced to the homogenous level of skateable terrain” (Borden et al. 2001; 13). Skate-boarders redefine the hegemonic values and

meanings ascribed to the urban landscape and thus reify their transgressive identity. Their identity which is partially built on the notion “that pleasure rather than work, use values rather than exchange values, activity rather than passivity are potential components of the future, as yet unknown city” (Borden et al. 2001; 2). “Out of place” skate-boarders use space in heretical ways which creates a new meaning in the places that they skate, and “if enough people follow suit, a whole new conception of ‘normality’ may arise” (Cresswell 1996; 165).

Children who have not yet become socialized in the adult-specified order of the city marvel at the world around them and are insatiably curious; they are unconscious of boundaries between public and private or the ‘proper’ uses of the built environment, and unbound by adult imperatives for efficiency of travel (Holloway & Valentine, 2001). Skateboarders and parkour athletes view urban space with a type of exploratory wonder that is similar to the ways young children experience spaces. Order, efficiency, and socialization, however, come at the expense of wonder, curiosity, and imagination. Transgressive groups like skate-boarders and parkour athletes are in their own way engaging in *childlike* wonder by challenging the hegemonic order of urban space by producing space for their own purpose. Mould (2015) writes,

By engaging in parkour, people are moving away from the spoon-fed cultural provisioning of the modern global creative city and participating in a process of urban citizenry that is allowing them to discover the urban and all the experiences it has to offer for themselves, and it is this process that characterizes parkour as ‘childlike’ (Mould 2015, 3)

Transgressive groups use space in creative ways that draw attention, sometimes inadvertently, to themselves and the space that they use. Street performers, or buskers, are a great example of playful uses of space that are sometimes policed due to their ‘un-productive’ use of space for the city (Flusty, 2000). The product of street performing is for the street performer themselves, as well as bystanders who enjoy the playful performances (Flusty, 2000). BMX riders, similarly,

engage with the city in a childlike, playful, way that challenges the notion that city space is for productive and ‘orderly’ use. Riders shock and unsettle “the public” because they use space in unorthodox ways, illuminating the elite production of social/spatial rules and boundaries that most people unquestioningly abide by.

Several key questions arise from this body of work discussed above. These questions have come to inform my research and have become the framework by which I have structured my argument: Using the work of David Harvey (1989), Doreen Massey (2013), Don Mitchell (1995), Henry Lefebvre (2003), Tim Cresswell (1996), and Neil Smith (1996, 98) I will first explain who creates the hegemonic order of this city is, and who are the inherent winners and losers of this system. With this understanding of the ‘order’ of the city understood several questions arise around street BMX riders’ roles in this city. These questions include 1) How do street BMX riders (re)script the ‘order’ of the city through their unconventional, exploratory, playful, and “unproductive” use of space? 2) How does the dialectical relationship between riders and the city simultaneously create the city as well as create street BMX itself? These questions will all be answered through a deeper engagement in my analysis section.

Chapter 3: Data and Methodology

In order to answer my research questions of 1) what is the hegemonic order of the city? 2) How do riders (re)make/script this order of the city? 3) How does the city also (re)make street BMX? I needed to collect data from several sources as well as utilize a multi-method approach in analyzing the data I collected. Data for my project came from two sources: 1) digital videos produced by street riders, and 2) interviews with Kurt, a bicycle shop employee, and my key informant Arron.

Data Sources

After my proposal was approved in late October 2018, I began the process for applying for IRB approval in order to conduct interviews in-person and over the phone with riders and bike shop employees. By early November I was approved by the IRB board to conduct my interviews and later that month I made a trip to New York City. My original plan was to observe a local street BMX ‘jam’, which is a gathering of riders at local skate parks or spots to ride and socialize. This jam was cancelled so I visited two different skate parks in Brooklyn hoping to find and speak to some riders. The parks I went to were McCarren park (where the jam was going to take place) and Cooper skate park, which is a small park that I have seen featured in some riding videos on YouTube. No riders were out at the time of my visit—probably because of it being midday on a cloudy and chilly Saturday. While in NYC, I also visited two different bike shops in Brooklyn Zookies: Bicycle and Meseroll Shop. These are where I met Arron and Kurt, and from these initial meetings I scheduled a later phone interview with Arron.

From this trip to NYC I made a connection to my key informant, Arron (I have changed all the names of people that I personally interviewed), who is a rider himself and a bike shop

owner. Through the next several months I conducted three phone interviews with Arron for a total of about six hours of discussion. My first interview with Arron was on November 30, 2018. For this interview I had a prepared two lists of questions (see appendix 1), one designed specifically for riders and another designed for shop owners. I prepared two separate lists with the thinking that shop owners and riders would have two different outlooks on riding; shop owners, I reasoned, would be more interested in promoting a positive image of BMX riding and would be trying to encourage newcomers to the sport, while riders would be less concerned with the image of the sport that they promoted and more likely to transgress and break rules. For Arron I employed both sets of questions, however, our discussions quickly moved away from the prepared questions and into topics that arose naturally. In the early interviews I was most interested in *what* and *where* riders were choosing to ride, and whether they viewed skate parks as an example of the city trying to stop riders from riding in the street and bring them under control. In addition to discussing riding spots, we also discussed BMX media; Arron pointed me in the direction of several YouTube channels and creators that I was not aware of. As a key informant, Arron, helped me to *member check* (Baxter & Eyles, 1997) the themes that I had identified through my preliminary research.

The principal takeaway from my interviews with Arron was that most riders are not nearly as transgressive as I had come to believe through my preliminary research based on videos. On reflection, this makes sense because street BMX videos are produced for viewers' attention, sponsorships, and notoriety, while in reality, riders are mostly riding in skateparks because this is where they can practice their tricks without being bothered by authorities or having bystanders get in their way. Every time that I asked Arron where some common "street spots" were he would usually steer the conversation back to established skate parks that riders

frequented such as Mullaly skate park in the Bronx which was one of the first parks built for riders in New York City. Street riding is still popular; however, it is more of a romantic vision of the sport—most riders spend the majority of their time riding in parks. Kurt, a bicycle shop employee who is a skateboarder but has many connections to BMX, said “street riding is sexy” (In-person-interview, Kurt, 11/24/18) and that’s why it is commonly featured in promotional videos and YouTube videos because it paints BMX as a renegade sport that pushes back against order and normalcy by using the street in unexpected ways. Despite these videos being ‘idealized’ versions of street riding compared to the everyday reality of riding, YouTube videos still inform the riding and culture of many street riders. This is because these videos garner massive amounts of views, and the channels themselves often have hundreds of thousands of subscribers. Looking at the comments we see riders commenting about their own riding, or the skill of the riders in the video. These online videos may not represent what most riders do on a daily basis, however, they *resonate* with everyday riders’ identities that embody a culture of daring and potential injury; and an attitude of creativity and wonder in approaching obstacles and spaces. The creative, masculine, and transgressive identities that are (re)produced in these videos are replicated across the globe by riders who see the riders in videos as their role models for the sport.

With these interviews in mind, I began curating a collection of YouTube videos that I would use as the basis for my analysis. YouTube videos have come a long way from being where people upload silly home videos. Today, many creators use the website as a platform to make a living, and many BMX riders are no different. Three years ago I came across several BMX “vlog” channels, which are channels centered around a specific rider and usually a collection of

his¹ friends. These videos would chronicle this rider's daily life which centered around riding his bike with friends. This is where I first came across Billy Perry and Austin Augie's channels. Billy has one of the biggest BMX focused vlog channels with over eight hundred thousand subscribers. YouTube is also a common way for new riders to find the sport, and channels like Billy's act as their entry to the sport; many new riders' understandings of what BMX is, where to ride, and what is cool come from watching these videos. In the comment sections of all of these videos there are a plethora of comments from all over the world expressing their admiration for the channel, how their own riding is progressing, or discussing what happened in the video. It is these large channels that attract the most attention and thus create the image of what street BMX is, which is why I chose YouTube as an ethnographic data source. However, what I have come to find out is that "YouTube riders" are different from the average rider who doesn't film their riding or upload it online. The image of BMX that big YouTube channels promote is, in fact, at odds with the image that Arron wants for the sport. He believes that these channels are detrimental to the sport and could be the reason that New York and other cities crack down on riders. More than that, Arron believes that these channels exploit the sport for profit and hurt other riders in the process. He brought up one incident where Billy Perry broke in to an off season waterpark with local riders and filmed the whole incident. Soon after posting the video to YouTube the local police found out, identified the riders, and charged them with trespassing as well as fined them for damages to the waterpark rides. Billy's video (that he has not taken down) has gained over 27 million hits, and Arron speculates that he made a lot of money off of the

¹ I use male pronouns here and throughout the rest of this paper because in over ten hours of video review, I have only seen young men riding. This is not to say that there are not female riders, just that they are, without a doubt, a minority group within street BMX riding.

video itself. Arron, as well as others in the riding community, feel betrayed by YouTube vloggers like Billy who they believe are exploiting the sport and other riders for profit.

I then asked Arron what channels and creators he thought I should look into and he told me about Animal Bikes as well as a local creator called AM:PM. Animal Bikes is one of the original BMX bike companies in New York City, and helped create East coast style riding as opposed to West coast style riding. Animal Bikes has a reputation as an “authentic” brand who has sponsored some of the sport’s most famous riders and has also created some of the most respected street BMX edits such as *Facts* and *Can I eat*. These videos are made up of multiple shots of many different riders across many different areas of New York and other cities. They differ greatly from vlog style videos because riders seldom speak to the camera. In these videos, the riding and the interactions between riders in the same group as well as with the city are most important. Vlog style videos are less popular among traditional riders, like Arron, because they seem “corny” and “selfish” to them, whereas videos put out by Animal or AM:PM are about the riding more than they are about the individual. BMX is incredibly social; it is a “brotherhood” Arron told me. Riders like Arron see vloggers as destructive to that brotherhood, however, based on the viewership of vlog style videos, it would seem that many other riders do not share Arron’s feelings.

In total, I curated and analyzed roughly nine hours of video from eight different BMX YouTube channels. The videos I chose were selected for a variety of reasons. First, these videos have gained a significant amount of views; often in the tens-of-thousands if not significantly more. Second, most of my videos take place in New York City, with a few outliers that take place on the west coast, or unintelligible areas. I chose videos predominantly from New York city because it was here that I did my fieldwork, and it is where my key informant, Arron, lives

and works. Finally, I specifically chose several videos from Billy Perry's channel because he is one of the first BMX channels that appears if you search for 'Street BMX' on YouTube. I reasoned that this fact would mean that many new riders would stumble into his channel as their introduction to the sport, which means that Billy is many riders' gateway into street riding and thus influences the profusion of the sport. Three of these channels were primarily vlog style channels and the rest were channels created by BMX Bicycle companies or teams. In order to analyze these videos, I created a list of qualitative codes (Cope & Kurtz, 2016) (seen in Table 3.1) based on themes that I had noticed from my preliminary research. These themes evolved over time, starting with codes such as 'negative interaction' and 'positive interaction', and the list was added to as new themes came to the surface. Such as the notion of 'authenticity' among street riders and street spots. Authenticity, here, refers to what street riders or street spots are considered 'cool' by other riders. Street riders choose to respect and even idolize certain riders, BMX brands, and spots for particular reasons. For example, riders become popular and well respected if they push the boundaries of the sport rather than stagnating by doing the same tricks or not being creative in terms of their riding (Phone Interview, Arron, 11/15/18). For example, riders like Nigel Sylvester, who publishes some of the most popular BMX videos that attract as many, if not more non-riders than they do actual BMX riders, is seen as a 'sell-out' by the purists in the BMX community. Nigel used to be an 'authentic' street rider; he rides currently for Animal BMX a brand with much respect in the community. However, because his most recent videos are sponsored by big-name companies like Samsung or G-Shock watches, riders like Arron believe that he is no longer pushing the sport of BMX through his riding, rather he is exploiting it for personal gain. Indeed, Nigel's videos are less about technical riding and more about skillful editing, cinematography, story-telling, and spectacle.

The data for this project has come from two primary sources as I have discussed above. My key informant, Arron, who I connected with through my trip to New York City acted as a crucial window into the sport and helped direct my further research. The videos that I included in my data set were partially informed by his advice, and our conversations illuminated key themes of street BMX. One of the most crucial of these realizations was the romanticized image of street BMX through videos was not the same as everyday riding. However, these videos are consumed by the BMX community and the ideals represented in them resonate with the projected identities of street riders at large.

Themes Identified in my Data

The results of my data made clear four key themes of street riding: 1) Exploration, wonder, and play are central components of not only YouTube videos but also average riders who do not film themselves riding. 2) Hyper masculinity is prevalent in YouTube videos through valorizing bodily injury from falling or crashing. Injuring oneself is a common occurrence when the consequence for failing a trick often means landing on concrete at high speeds. Videos often show riders continually failing at a trick (sometimes brutally so) until they get it. I refer to this as hyper masculinity because riders seek to prove their grit by accepting and overcoming pain to land tricks, with the overarching goal of appearing tough, strong, and courageous in front of their fellow male riders. Documenting their failed trick attempts also helps the audience understand the toil that the rider went through to land the trick, and also makes the audience respect him due to how much pain he endured. Videos often show the wounds that riders suffer after finally landing the trick. 3) A particular geography of the City is expressed through filmic landscapes. Usually videos will include a “locating shot” (Cresswell and Dixon 2002). Locating shots are common in television shows and films as a way to orient the audience. These shots will consist

of an iconic landscape or a famous city skyline and are loaded with ideals and cultural values. For example, “in classic westerns, simple morality plays staged against a backdrop of homesteads and vast, stable, panoramic vistas” (Kirsch 2002, 39) 4) Transgression and bucking authority are common tropes in the BMX community. Videos often portray riders as hyper-transgressive because videos that chronicle confrontation with security guards, angry pedestrians, or make riders out to be renegades all attract viewers. Arron believes that many of the original street riders going back to the 1980s when the sport was in its infancy were the renegades that were pushing back against authority, however, today, most riders are just trying to have fun on their bikes, and skate parks have made riding much safer and more fun for many riders. Even so, the renegade side of BMX is romanticized through videos.

Methods of Analysis

To analyze my data, I employed four different methods. The first method was to create a list of qualitative codes that I used to analyze the forty-two videos that I collected. Below is the chart of my code list, which I am sharing here to identify my process transparently. This list has evolved as I gathered more videos and different themes became apparent.

Table 3.1 List of Qualitative Codes

| Code | Description |
|-----------------------|---|
| Humor | Videos often include examples of humor. Whether it be a shot of pedestrians or passers by doing something objectively funny, strange encounters, the riders laughing at an inside joke, or humorous editing. In general, things that are not necessarily riding related that bring us into the lives and personality of the riders and film crew. |
| Positive interactions | Riders often have positive interactions with pedestrians or authority figures including police or security guards. Pedestrians are seen cheering on riders, sharing with the rider the video clip that they captured of the trick the rider just preformed, or comments are shared from security guards expressing how they |

| | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| | appreciate how “cool” or impressive the tricks that the riders are doing are, but that they still have to kick them out of the spot |
| Negative interactions | <p>Just as much if not more, riders interact negatively with pedestrians or authority figures. Here I include facial expressions on pedestrians, captured in the video, where the pedestrian is visibly shocked or scared by the riders riding at them, landing a trick in front of them, crashing, or being generally loud.</p> <p>Security guards also can be hostile and try to push or block riders from riding. These aggressive authority figures often become the “clickbait” for videos because they attract viewers to the video.</p> |
| Documentation of Trespass | Videos often include shots of signs that prohibit riding, skating, or trespassing in general. After these shots or in the background, riders are usually doing tricks, totally ignoring the signs. |
| Documentation of “Breaking in” | Here breaking in means a blatant crossing of a physical boundary meant to delineate between public and private space. While trespassing is a broader term that I consider to mean being generally ‘out of place.’ This includes shots of riders climbing fences, hopping over gates, or clearly riding in “out of bounds” and/or private property |
| Territorialization | This includes scenes of “branding” of locations. While videos in general serve as a type of territorialization by documenting their uses of space, there are also more blatant examples of territorialization. These include: putting stickers on buildings, road signs, and other surfaces. Or, more often, adding to the “defacement” of surfaces. such as tire slides which produce black smudges on ledges or stairs; “waxing” a rail or ledge to make it more slick and easier to slide (grind) on this leaves a residue on the surface. |
| Editing of Space | Editing of space is a form of territorialization, however, I consider editing of space to be a more purposeful effort of changing the space in order to ride.; This might include moving objects that are sometimes put in to deliberately prevent riding; sweeping the spot free of debris; placing wood down to bridge harsh transitions between riding surfaces; digging to create ramps. Lastly, while I haven’t specifically seen this in videos, it is not unheard of to grind off “skate-stops” that prevent riding. These efforts are often shown in the videos to show the audience just how much work went into riding the spot, and to also appeal to the audience, many of whom have participated in similar efforts. |
| Riding “temporary spaces” | Temporary spaces include the flatbed of a truck; a construction zone, street trash; bunny-hopping over a parked (or moving) vehicles such as bikes, mopeds, or motorcycles; and other surfaces or objects that will not be there or in the exact same position indefinitely. Using these spaces to ride is another way that BMX riders view and experience space in a childlike, opportunistic, way because these spaces are inherently ephemeral and only found through luck and exploration. |

| | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Displays of hyper masculinity | This includes shots of wounds suffered from riding and crashing (bloody elbows, smashed fingers, ripped clothing). Also included here are the constant shots of failing at the trick before landing it successfully. Crashing, and documenting the crash, is often just as important (if not more important) than landing the trick. Pain, and acceptance of pain, is a part of the sport and through their acceptance of pain and injury riders (re)create their masculine identities. |
| Location identifiers | This includes shots that give us a clue, or an answer, to where (what city, country, region) we are in. This is a common cinematic strategy, however, in BMX videos we are immediately taken to an unfamiliar space after these locator shots. This is a way in which riders inform the viewers what this city or space means to them, and how it is a different space from the one 'we' conceptualize of. This isn't <i>your</i> NYC this is BMX riders' NYC. |
| Performance | While these videos and riding in general inherently has a performative element, often times in the videos the camera will show a crowd built up watching the rider, the rider's friends all clapping after a pulled off trick, or a passerby reacting positively to a landed trick. |

In addition to qualitative coding of videos I also used visual interpretation of the book *Temporarily Permanent*. Arron provided me with this resource that was produced by the well-regarded BMX photographer Rob Dolecki and videographer Bob Scerbo, who also was the mastermind behind many of Animal BMX's earliest films. This book is a collection of before and after shots of famous riders riding spots that they made popular years ago that have since changed or been totally destroyed through development. Most of the spots that are featured are not recognizable to an outside audience, even many riders would probably have trouble identifying the spots because most are shot in parking lots, abandoned buildings, parks, or playgrounds. The title of the book, as well as its content, delve into the temporary nature of street spots and the ephemeral nature of the city. Bob Scerbo in the foreword of the book explains how new spots are always being found because riders themselves are changing. Spots that were never considered rideable before are now getting a fresh look by more talented riders of today.

However, just as quickly as new spots are found, the old ones are reabsorbed into the fabric of the city as new development takes place. In this book, I was specifically analyzing its subtle, and sometimes overt, political challenges of the capitalist system. The images in the book, as well as the cover art (Figure 4.8 and 4.9), call attention to the disappearance of the creative landscape that riders see in the city. Here, I focus on the idea that riders feel a sense of loss as the world that they ride in continues to be developed in ways that obliterate difference, creativity, and imagination. With that said, I also draw heavily from Bob Scerbo's (2018) contribution in the forward of the book where he explains the boundlessness of street riding, in that, it is constantly evolving as new spots are found and the skill level of riders is improving constantly.

The bulk of my data came from the pool of YouTube videos that I selected. I analyzed these videos through deconstructing the themes, actions, and reactions that I noticed in them. In these videos I was looking for particular themes that I had translated into codes, as seen in Table 3.1. Additionally, I was particularly interested in moments of conflict, or blatant transgression (jumping fences, disregarding 'no-riding' signs, being especially disruptive to bystanders). Through deconstructing these moments of conflict over space I was able to understand the social and material meanings of place, and thus, how place is constructed through the practice of particular identities in over contested spaces. Additionally, analyzed the landscapes of certain shots in the videos that I watched paying special attention to the shots chosen, the cinematography, and the editing choices made by the riders. Several scenes were rich with layered meanings that the cinematographers and editors of the videos want us, as the viewer, to recognize. Finally, I used theories from the study of geography of film (Cresswell & Dixon, 2002) (Lukinbeal, 2005) and mobile video methodologies (Spinney, 2011) to analyze the videos that I had collected. Central to my video analysis was understanding how film portrays space and

landscape through the perspective of the cinematographer and the editor. The notion that film captures the unadulterated truth is incorrect, rather, film is a representation of the space it captures. With this in mind, I had to understand in what ways the landscape of the city as seen through videos was a representation of the city from rider's perspectives.

Limitations

One of the key limitations of my research is my limited number of rider interviews. Originally, I had planned on doing several more interviews with riders, however, I was unable to connect with any other riders. For this reason, I refocused my energy on developing and maintaining my relationship with Arron over the course of my research. I also recognize that Arron can only provide one perspective on street riding, and while he has been a member of the riding community since he was a teenager, he cannot speak for all riders. I will not claim that the conclusions I draw from my interviews with Arron apply to all riders, however, many of the key insights that I gained from our discussions fit with broader themes and theories that I have observed in my video analysis as well as my empirical research. For these reasons, I have a partial knowledge of the sport of street BMX that is based on interviews with Arron as well as my ethnographic work analyzing specific videos.

I would also like to point out my own positionality as a young male researching this topic, which could have contributed to the ease in which I created a relationship with Arron. I do believe my previous exposure and interest in street BMX helped this relationship, as well as making it easier to pick out themes within videos. Also, as a mountain biker, I found it easier to discuss and notice certain tricks, elements of riding style, and also similar themes of transgression that are present in both the mountain biking and BMX community. Even though I

am a bike rider from a different discipline I think that I was able to more easily connect with Arron as well as more effectively analyze videos.

However, I did feel like an outsider at certain points during my research. For example, during my trip to skate parks in NYC, I felt distinctly out of place without a skateboard or a BMX bike. I worried about where to sit and stand because I didn't want to get in anyone's way. I noticed many skaters (there were no riders) looking quizzically at me and my commuter bike that I had brought for the trip. I could imagine that had there been riders present, connecting with them might have been slightly difficult based on my obvious 'outsider' characteristics.

Chapter 4: Crossing the I's and dotting the T's: How do riders *edit* the *script* of the City?

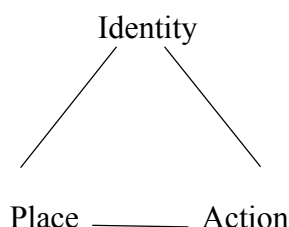
There are two primary ways in which street riders (re)make the city: 1) through *editing* of physical space and 2) through symbolically (*re*)*scripting* the hegemonic order of the city. To be clear, while I refer generally to street riders, I am only considering the street riders that I have seen in videos, as well as riding practices that I have discussed with Arron. Due to the limited scope of my data collection I am focusing specifically on street riding as portrayed through YouTube videos, which I have found out is a more transgressive and disruptive portrayal of street BMX. With that said, videos on YouTube are consumed by a large group of BMX riders, and these videos speak to the romanticized renegade image that many riders have of the sport. These videos challenge the order of the city and gain massive numbers of views. These videos are also sponsored by BMX specific companies who are marketing and monetizing this renegade image.

The hegemonic order of the city that riders in videos challenge is a city organized by and for political and economic elites, reflecting goals of power, profitability, and the accumulation of capital. In order to be profitable for elites, the space of the city is organized to be productive, predictable, and efficient. This type of space is enforced by authorities (formal policing) and social regulation (dirty looks from pedestrians if you do something that breaks the “status quo”). This is the city that Steven Flusty (2000) refers to as the “hard city” which is the manifestation of these principles in the form of the built environment. The only time that this hard city is allowed to be changed is if those changes will increase profits for a select few. Street riders use space in unauthorized ways that are counter to the ideals instilled within the hard city in part because they are purposely unproductive, inefficient, and disorderly. Flusty (2000) explains this as the

creation of a “soft city” within the hard city itself. Soft cities, he explains, are created by using space in unexpected and playful ways that challenge the hegemonic order of cities (Flusty, 2000)

Street riders *edit* the landscape physically by moving purposefully placed blockades, using found items like wood or metal to create riding spots, or cleaning debris away from a spot. What is important to note, here, is that I consider editing of landscape to be a material process, whereas (re)scripting the the order of the city is a *discursive* process. With that said, while editing space physically can still (re)script the city I separate the two concepts for the purposes of my argument. These physical edits are made without authorization and are done to allow the riders to use space in creative and previously unimagined ways. Creativity and playful engagement are key components to a street riders’ imaginary of the city. Exploration is also a key part of a rider’s experience of the city, and their exploration often *rescripts* the order of the spaces they ride. By re-scripting I mean overwriting existing meaning, uses, and potential for spaces by consuming and producing that space differently than non-riders. Street BMX riders, Arron told me, are always “looking for something to ride...finding the spot no one has ridden” (Phone Interview, Arron, 11/30/18). Riders are not moving in traditionally productive ways because they are not usually riding their bikes to commute to work, for transportation more generally, or to deliver pizzas or documents like a bike messenger; instead they are riding to have fun. BMX bikes have very few utilitarian qualities, unlike traditional bikes, because they were designed almost exclusively as a ‘toy.’ BMX bikes do not have gears to make climbing hills easier, they cannot have fenders or racks mounted to them, the ‘seats’ are not even designed to be sat on for long periods, and most modern street BMX bikes do not even have front or rear brakes; relying instead on the rider jamming their foot onto the rear tire or dragging their foot on the ground to stop. Beyond their unconventional bikes, riders move in unconventional and un-

productive to many non-riders. This use of space challenges the hegemonic order of the city simply by moving through it in unexpected ways to find the elusive un-ridden spots. Most non-riders don't explore the city in the same way; their idea of exploring the city is finding the quiet restaurant that hasn't gotten popular yet, going to attractions and sight-seeing, or shopping. Despite both riders and non-riders engaging with some level of exploration, riders are the ones labeled as transgressive. Why? Consider the diagram below:



Transgression can occur when any or all of these three pieces breaks the status quo. In this way, transgression is completely contextual, and this applies to riders as well. Separated from their bike, a rider looks just like any other young person. Place a rider into a skate park and their actions are neither questioned nor challenged because the particular place of the skate park is a space designed for riding. However, if you take a rider, and place them in the context of a downtown plaza in New York City full of tourists, pedestrians, and business people rushing to and from meetings or quickly trying to eat their lunch in an outside courtyard the rider's actions *become* transgressive because they challenge the rules of that place. Another dimension of their transgression is their unproductive ways of moving through space. While non-riders tend to start their trip from one point and journey to a very specific destination, riders tend to move far more haphazardly as they search for spots to ride. For non-riders the end goal is often more important than the journey itself. However, riders, while they may be going to a specific place (to meet a friend, go to a skate park, or get to a specific spot) they often inject small moments of fun into

their movements around the city by changing their route to include jumping over a small ledge over there, grinding a hand rail through a plaza, or weaving through pedestrians while doing a wheelie. Put simply, riders tend to move in exploratory ways through the city in order to prioritize fun, which conflicts with how the city was designed to be experienced as well as how many non-riders move through the city.

To explain what the hegemonic order of the city is and how riders challenge that order, the following section is broken up into three parts. In the first part, I discuss how the modern city is one based on enforcing order by casting out groups that appear to be disorderly and harmful to the health of the city. Here, I draw heavily on Neil Smith's (1996, 1998) work on the revanchist city in the post-gentrification period of the 1990s, and Tim Creswell's (1996) work on transgression and 'out-of-place' groups. The second part of my analysis will answer the question: How do riders challenge the established order of the city? I will answer this question in two parts: the first being how riders edit space physically; drawing on Iain Borden et al. (2001) as well as examples from my ethnographic research. The second part will examine how riders (re)script the hegemonic order of the city using many examples from my research supported by Ollie Mould's (2015) work on childlike wonder of the city through the eyes of parkour athletes as well as Steven Flusty's (2000) notions of play as a form of resistance to urban regulations. The bulk of my analysis focuses on how riders *disrupting* the taken-for-granted flow of urban processes and places, and, in turn, edit and (re)script the city itself. However, the city has also *created* street riding, and without the urban landscape built of concrete, filled with rideable terrain, and organized by a set of rules there would be no street riding. The final portion of my analysis will reflect on the dialectical relationship between street riding and the city.

The “Order” of the City

In the 1990s cities in the United States were going through a social and economic crisis. Gentrification as a means to boost the economies of poorer neighborhoods surrounding wealthier ones had failed as a viable urban revitalization strategy (Smith, 1996). In the wake of this failure, the accompanying economic downturn, and the rising crime rates, drug use, and homelessness the urban elite blamed marginalized groups as the cause of urban decline (Smith 1998, 3). *Revanchism*, Smith argues, is the “reaction against the basic assumption of liberal urban policy, namely that government bears some responsibility for ensuring a decent minimum level of daily life for everyone” (Smith 1998, 1). The white middle class, Smith (1998) explains, believed the city to be their birthright and that birthright was stolen from them by, “the most oppressed—workers and ‘welfare mothers,’ immigrants and gays, people of color and homeless people, squatters, anyone who demonstrates in public” (Smith 1998, 1). The anger towards these groups was mirrored and doubled down upon by city officials like Mayor Rudolph Giuliani who put in place no-tolerance policies towards unwanted groups and particularly homeless people (Smith, 1998). The revanchist city, Smith (1998) contends “is in every respect the ugly cultural politics of neoliberal globalization...it represents a response spearheaded from the standpoint of white and middle class interests against those people who, they feel, stole their world (and their power) from them” (Smith 1998, 10). *Disorder* in public spaces, Giuliani and the white upper class argued, was the root cause of all urban decline and “revenge against the sources of disorder was raised to a moral obligation” (Smith 1998, 3).

Mayor Giuliani’s New York was a city that cracked down on “disorder” by prosecuting powerless and marginalized groups that the city elite perceived as the cause of urban decline, rather than the victims of that decline. The battle over who has a right to public space and how

should that space be used were key fights in Giuliani's New York. As mentioned above, space is partially organized around areas where certain people can or cannot go and where certain actions or practices may or may not be done. However, no-go-zones take on heightened symbolic importance to groups seeking to challenge the hegemonic order of society. Space that on one hand is used to control certain groups can just as easily become a space to subvert that control:

The graffiti artist in New York could, intentionally or not, upset so many because of the territorial organization of New York into...a 'segmented world.' The graffitists were not actually harming anyone: they were marking surfaces with paint. Because of the fine division into 'proper places,' this in itself was cause for alarm and was considered to be violence...the marking of the spaces constituted a symbolically violent offense against the forces of property and order (Cresswell 1996, 164)

Using space in unorthodox ways exposes the boundaries and principles that control society, however, out-of-place people acting on space in unconventional ways also works to create new meanings of place and even a new form of "normality" (Cresswell 1996).

The process of creating a new form of normality is what Iain Borden et al. (2001) discuss with how skateboarders edit the meaning of the spaces in which and on which they skate. They write, "skateboarders usually prefer the lack of meaning and symbolism of more everyday spaces—the space of the street, the urban plaza, the mini-mall—just as graffiti artists tend to write on out-of-of-the-way (not always very visible) sites" and, as I cited in the introduction, "it is also an attempt to write anew, not to change meaning but to insert a meaning where previously there was none" (Borden et al. 2001, 6). Here I disagree with Borden et al.'s (2001) thinking that transgressive groups such as skateboarders act on spaces that previously had no meaning. The 'street, the urban plaza, the mini-mall', and even (seemingly) abandoned spaces, are all places of complex meaning and of specific rules that govern how they can be used and by whom. BMX

riders, like skaters, certainly insert new meanings into space as Borden et al. claim, however, I prefer the more nuanced argument that Oli Mould (2015) provides where he explains that parkour athletes as a transgressive group turn the urban landscape and its features into a sequence of erasures and new meanings layered upon one another (Mould, 2015). In this way, BMX riders like skaters and parkour athletes, do not insert meaning where there was none, but rather, inscribe “a palimpsest of meanings into the city by continually acting upon it” (Mould 2015, 6). Duncan and Duncan (2010) also invoke the notion of the palimpsest in their work on landscape interpretation. Landscape, and our understanding of how it is created, maintained, and edited is important because how we view landscapes is integral to how we fit into underlying power structures that are enforced spatially. People often overlook the class, race, and gender inequalities that are deeply embedded within landscapes but obfuscated and naturalized by the “status quo” (Duncan & Duncan 2010, 230).

While not explicitly discussing landscape, Doreen Massey (1994) explains that how we experience space is a contextual process that is not equal for all due to the complex ‘power geometry’ that constructs space. Power is thus inextricably linked to the construction of landscape, and BMX riders, often times inadvertently, expose these complex power relations by acting in unconventional ways, which then (re)produces the landscape of the city. In this way, a handrail which is usually overlooked by most people and whose primary function is to reduce risk becomes a perfect piece of urban architecture for a BMX rider to perform a dangerous trick on. Once a rider has acted on that handrail, or any other piece of the urban landscape, that rider has, in effect, created another use for that space, and thus has created an entirely new space that serves a completely different purpose. Their (re)production of landscape does not go unnoticed by bystanders or pedestrians. Nor should it. By subverting hegemonic conceptions of order

within space, riders call attention to the power structures that created and govern that space, and this causes non-riders to react in a number of ways. Sometimes people react in shock, anger, or amazement. People sometimes stop and watch riders doing tricks in busy plazas, film them on their phones, and cheer for them when they finally land a trick. Even among security guards there is a disparity in reactions. Some treat the riders as though they are launching a personal attack on their own authority; going so far as to push riders off their bikes as they ride by.



Figure 4.1 Austin Augie in *Austin Augie- DIG BMX X The Fully Factory*

How bystanders react is crucial because it frames the riders as something to look at, something different, something unexpected. The fact that riders are taken note of or challenged shows that they are upsetting the hegemonic order of the city. In Figure 4.1 we see a security guard pushing Austin Augie off the rail after telling him several times not to ride on it. When Austin disregarded his orders the guard not only felt personally attacked and disrespected, but saw Austin's use of this space as, to quote Cresswell again, an attack against "the forces of property and order" (Cresswell 1996, 164). This interaction created a new landscape of transgression, creativity, performance, and violence. Yet another layer has been added to the palimpsest of this landscape. Key here is the notion of performance because "landscapes are not merely symbolic,

but...are ‘performed’ as members of various groups act out their identities” (Duncan & Duncan 2010, 234). As we see, the security guard performs his identity as the agent of authority and order and the rider, Austin, exposes the boundary that the guard is tasked with enforcing. Austin and the guard – through their actions and identity positions – have created the ability for this place, this particular landscape to become a space of creativity, transgression, and violence. Without both of these actors, Austin and the guard, acting on this space and performing their identity the transgressive landscape of this space would not exist. Riders (re)script the societal meaning of space, and (re)create the landscape the city, through the iterative performance of their actions and identities on it.

Imaginative and creative uses of space by marginalized groups in a way deflect the power of the dominant social order, which they lacked the power to challenge in the first place. Political and economic elites impose their control over the “common people” through a “language” of control that is coded into the construction of space (de Certeau, 2000). The ‘language’ of the elites that de Certeau (2000) discusses is a language disseminated through the built environment and administration of cities. We can see this in Neil Smith’s (1996, 1998) work discussed previously; when out-of-place groups in society use space that is coded with the laws, ideals, and economic and social aspirations of elites, those people are targeted as a threat to the stability and health of the city itself (Smith 1996, 1998). BMX riders, while not persecuted in the same ways as other marginalized groups that are brutalized and treated with violence, are often seen in a similar light by city elites. BMX rider’s transgressive use of space is akin to a homeless person ‘reading’ a bench as a possible place to sleep whereas housed people see it as a quick place to sit down and take a break. Similarly, riders engage with and read a bench or any other piece of urban architecture and space in unorthodox ways that chip away at the *order* that Mayor Giuliani

and other city governments have so meticulously concretized over the last several decades.

How do riders *edit* the city?

Riders *physically* change the space in which they ride both deliberately and passively. Deliberately editing space is when riders actively try to make a spot ride-able or create a spot all together. On the other hand, passive physical editing is what I consider the ‘traces’ that riders leave on spaces that they have touched like black tire marks from skidding on surfaces, residue from the wax that riders use to decrease friction on surfaces they are grinding on, or other damage or alterations done to spots through riding.



Figure 4.2 Rich Forne in *BMX-Rich Forne Welcome to Federal 2017* doing a curved wall ride. On the wall you can see countless scuff marks from his own tires and probably other riders' as well

Physical editing, both deliberate and passive, is what often prompts the use of, as Arron referred to as, “stoppers” (Phone Interview, Arron, 11/30/18). These are usually pieces of metal, sometimes made to look ornamental, that are meant to stop riders from using certain spaces to ride, which is similar to urban architecture made to deter homeless people from sleeping.

However, stoppers do not always work. Riders sometimes can simply ride over them, incorporate them into their trick, or if the spot is “good enough” riders will come out with angle grinders and remove the stopper or fill in purposefully placed holes and gaps with concrete (Phone Interview, Arron, 11/30/18).



Figure 4.3 Animal BMX *Facts*. A rider uses a metal stopper as a feature to ride.

Somewhat ironically, stoppers actually end up increasing the talent of the riding community because these stoppers become a new challenge to be overcome, as seen in Figure 4.3.

Stoppers take on many forms from the pieces of angle iron bolted to a wall or decorative pieces of urban furniture placed in the way of the entry or exit of a spot. For example, in a video published by Billy Perry he and his friends go to a ledge in a public plaza in front of some

restaurants. As the trio approaches the spot they see that three raised flower bed planters have been placed in the exit of the ledge to stop them from riding.



Figure 4.4 two of Billy’s friends move the decorative planters in their way in Billy Perry’s 2018 *Street Game of Bike*

“They’re trying to shut down the spot!” Billy yells when they see the planters, but quickly his two friends move all three of the planters out of the way of the ledge and proceed to ride. To most other user groups the installation of flower boxes is a positive thing in a city, and would be met with approval or go largely unnoticed. However, to riders, as seen with Billy and his friends, it is immediately seen as an attempt to stop them from riding.

However, none of these physical alterations are done to make a spot ‘easier’ to ride. When I brought up editing a spot to Arron he immediately said that that was a ‘no no’ and essentially that it wasn’t cool or ‘street’ to make a spot easier to ride—ride it as you find it, he explained. Even something like landing on grass to minimize the chance of hurting oneself in the event of a crash is looked down upon because it’s not ‘cool.’ Landing on grass when a concrete landing is right next to it is like doing a trick in a skate park with a “rezzy pad” which is a padded landing ramp designed to safely learn new tricks (Phone Interview, Arron, 11/30/18).

However, the exception to this rule is making the spot ride-able all together, not easier *to* ride. For example, the image below shows Billy Perry finding a broken piece of plywood and making it into a ramp to do a wall ride at an underpass in New York City.



Figure 4.5 Billy Perry doing a wall ride using a piece of plywood as a ramp in his video *Sketchy BMX quarterpipe in NYC!*

Re-scripting Order Through Play and Wonder

Street BMX riders, much like skateboarders or parkour athletes, view the city in a creative and ‘childlike’ and ‘playful’ (Mould, 2015; Flusty, 2000). *Childlike* should not be confused with the notion that riders are *childish* or riding a bike is only for children. Rather, riders are *childlike* because they are in some small way rediscovering the *wonder* of everyday life through breaking away “from centralizing forces of socialization and conformity” (Mould 2015, 8). Experiencing the city in such a way is very different from the average adult city dweller whose movement is often absent of childlike wonder. The absence of wonder in daily life for most people could be attributed to how movement through the city is programmed and

orderly due to infrastructure like sidewalks which have made walking a (relatively) insulated, clean, and safe endeavor for some people and groups (Ingold 2004). Riders reconnect with a playful reading and usage of urban space because they move in such opportunistic and imaginative ways.

As mentioned above, Iain Borden et al. (2001) discusses how skateboarders, much like BMX riders, interpret architecture and spaces in creative ways. Through this lens skaters and BMX riders view space in the city as “a uniform entity, a constant layer through the city that can be utilized, in this case, as a surface on which to skate. All elements of the city are thus reduced to the homogenous level of skateable terrain” (Borden et al. 2001, 13). Of course, the skill of the rider and their creativity are what determine what can and cannot be ridden; the more creative and skillful the rider is, the more ways there are for the city to be ridden. Their subjective interpretation of landscapes highlights the *playfulness* in which they view the city; not only do they view space in fundamentally different ways than non-riders, but there is little consensus for how space can or should be used among riders themselves. Indeed, play is inherently unstructured, experimental, and imaginative; these qualities, set against the backdrop of the city illuminate the hegemonic order of space. Steven Flusty (2000) argues that “highly restricted, (quasi)-public space is repeatedly commandeered for the honing and performance of unauthorized creative acts;” these playful acts, he goes on to explain, “function to resist authoritatively imposed conceptions of what the city is to be” (Flusty 2000, 150). As Flusty argues, the city is not a fixed entity, but rather, is a continually evolving collection of spaces, and so no space can be understood as only for one purpose. As riders show us, spaces like outdoor plazas are not only places to sit and relax, but also dynamic spaces of play and performance, risk and transgression.



Figure 4.6 Anthony Panza doing a manual over a bench as two other people sit in the outdoor plaza in, *Daily Cruise* 24

The bench in figure 4.6 is both a bench in the conventional sense, but it also a spot to ride. Riders' reading of this space, not as one of orderly relaxation, but a space for riding shows that there are other ways that a city can be read, consumed, and – indeed - *produced*. Riders doing aggressive tricks, scraping along the sides of the benches, bike chains slapping against the metal frame all undermine the “orderly” purpose of space by reconsidering it as a space to ride. As with the bench that is also a riding spot, alternative readings of space create new space. Riders *create* the spaces that they ride because they take that urban plaza and make it into a skate park by riding it. However, their reading and consumption of space is transgressive. Depending on who you are, sitting on a public bench is generally considered a proper use of space for most people because those benches were designed to be used. When the bench becomes a space to ride it *reveals* to us what we had taken for granted: how this space has been coded as a space of contemplative relaxation with benches, trees, and sculptures for a certain groups of people. Other

groups like homeless people, sometimes buskers, skateboarder, and riders are told to move along to remove their transgressive uses of space and cede to the ‘public’ will.

There is also no singular way that a space like the one above can be read by riders themselves, which opens the door to a limitless number of creative ways that spaces can be used, limited only by the riders own imagination and skill level. One rider might completely overlook the potential that a certain collection of curbs, benches, and ledges has, but another rider might see a potential line that has never been ridden. For example, in a video titled “Chased Out of the Spot!” by Austin Augie a YouTube BMX ‘vlogger’ with nearly half a million subscribers, he and his friend, Anthony Panza, ride around the city riding various street spots they find in New York City. The pair comes across a small handrail and Austin explains to the camera “we came across this rail, which I might add might be the world’s smallest rail. Panza doesn’t think I can grind it. I think I can actually get a line on it”. In the image below we see Austin ‘grinding’ the small handrail that is only as long as his bike. Grinding is a type of trick that riders do often using the



Figure 4.7 Austin Augie in *Chased Out of the Spot!*

metal or plastic pegs attached to their wheels to slide along surfaces like handrails or ledges.

Austin lands the trick on his second attempt after crashing on the sidewalk on his first go. In this example we see precisely how a rider’s skill and imagination blend together in order to read the

urban landscape in a unique, creative, and playful way. To revisit Flusty's conceptualization, this exemplifies the coterminous of the hard (manifested by the handrail itself and its purpose to create safety) and soft city (Flusty, 2000). The 'hard' city is all the built space that we see around us in the city, but it is also all of the rules, order, and ideals that are coded into those spaces by powerful economic and political actors (Flusty, 2000). The 'soft' city is the collection of invisible spaces that are created by alternative uses of the hard city – Austin's rescripting of a handrail as a spot and the video itself serve to blend the soft and hard city here.

Arron explained to me that riders look at "all the features of a city to ride" which includes artistic sculptures, stairs, ledges, or drops (Phone interview, Arron, 11/30/18). Riders also categorize areas of the city differently based on what features are common there. For example, sculptures in the financial district attract riders because they act "like quarter pipes" in a skate park (Phone interview, Arron, 11/30/18). He also told me that city parks are known among riders for their cement sculptures and "weird benches" that can be ridden like a pump track where the rider doesn't pedal but instead forces the bike up and down with their legs to generate speed as they coast over bumps (Phone interview, Arron, 11/30/18). These are further examples of how we can see soft cities created within the hard city through alternative uses of that space by riders. Bob Scerbo (2018) in the forward of the book *Temporarily Permanent*, a collection of before and after shots of BMX riders at famous spots, writes: "As street riding continues to evolve, what was seemingly unrideable a short time ago and barely looked at is now desirable. What constitutes a spot continues to change, and it does so at a rate that is always ahead of the evolution of the tricks themselves" (Scerbo 2018). Though, as Scerbo (2018) explains, everything in the city has the potential to be a spot, riders transgress on a landscape that was not

built for them because virtually none of the street spots that they ride were built with the intent to be ridden.

Most riders are not usually actively resisting that order, rather, they are passively challenging spatial norms through their counter-hegemonic imagination of city space. Oli Mould (2015) argues that parkour athletes engage in a “softer politics” (Mould 2015, 3) that are indeed counter-hegemonic but are not “reactive protest against the forces of neoliberal capitalism (as in the case with other urban subversive activities)” (Mould 2015, 3). However, while most riders do not actively challenge the hegemonic order of society, some riders are taking an active stance against that order. For example, the cover art of *Temporarily Permanent*, by Rob Dolecki (2018), offers a unique view of how some riders perceive their position in the neoliberal city. Here, on the front and back covers (shown below in figures 4.8 and 4.9)

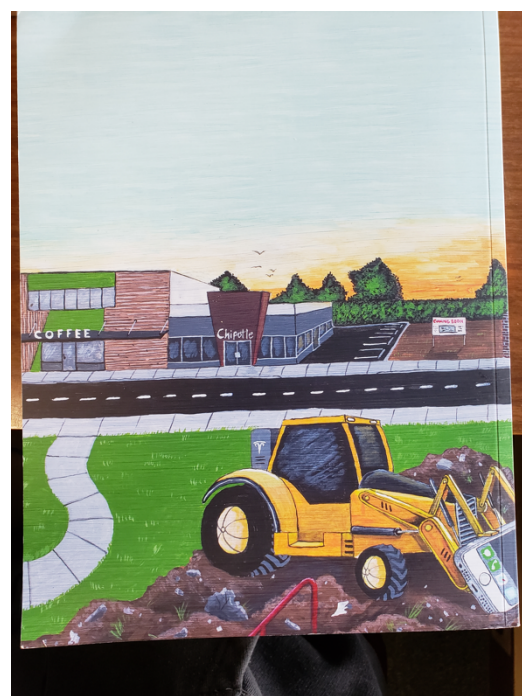
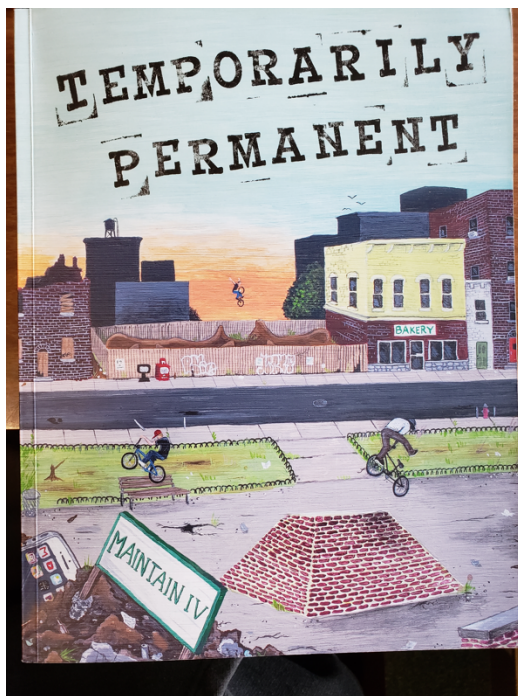


Figure 4.8 (left) and figure 4.9 (right) the front and back cover by Dave McDermott (2018) in *Temporarily Permanent*

we see the ideal vision of the city for BMX riders being demolished by a bulldozer powered by a Tesla battery pack with an iPhone as its cutting blade in figure 4.9. The bulldozer clearly represents a gentrified landscape which includes a generic coffee shop, a Chipotle restaurant, and manicured grass. Henri Lefebvre (2003) explains that serially reproducing hegemonic space is characteristic of post-industrial cities seeking to maximize their power and enforce order through the abolition of difference. Riders are a characteristic ‘other’ to hegemonic society. In line with this, the rear cover of the book omits riders entirely, which suggests that they feel erased from the landscape of the modern city that prioritizes business and productivity above the people that live in the city. Looking inside the book, we see more clear evidence of how former spots are swallowed up by development. For example, in Figure 4.11 and 4.12 below we see Bob Scerbo riding the same spot ten years apart. Where there was formerly a curved bank, there is now a large sign advertising stores in a strip mall, which is a poignant example of commercial development can destroy spaces that riders once inhabited.

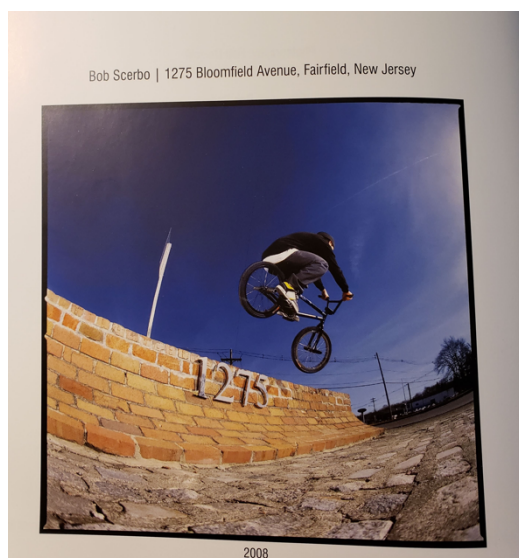


Figure 4.11



Figure 4.12

The space that riders write themselves into, the one that the post-modern city destroys, as riders see it, is a space of opportunities; where a vacant lot can be turned into a do it yourself (DIY) dirt jump track, as seen in the background of the front cover (figure 4.8). Despite this fictionalized neighborhood's dilapidated appearance, this is the landscape that riders romanticize and envision for themselves. This vision is not strictly fictionalized either. Arron recollected his time digging at a DIY dirt jump park on the waterfront in New York City. Though he is a grown man and a business owner he explained that he "felt like a kid again" digging in the dirt with his friends to create a place to ride for himself and others in the city he now lives and works in (Phone interview, Arron, 11/15/18). Physically creating space is a core part of street BMX culture because, historically, riders have never been given a space to ride.

This cover art and Arron's experiences exemplify the childlike wonder (Mould 2015) that riders have of the city. As suggested above, the term childlike, as Mould (2015) explains, does not mean that parkour is "undertaken by children and young adults (although of course these are the predominant participants) but because it demands a more youthful 'state of mind' that is politically subversive, particularly in relation to the city" (Mould 2015, 3). Similarly, a 'youthful state of mind' is necessary for riders to have because the only way to find new spots to ride is to take new paths through the city; to venture off the beaten path to forgotten or little used corners and back alleys of the city where spots yet to be found are waiting. This gets at the ephemeral and ever-changing nature of the city. Here I am again invoking the notion of the hard and soft city within Stephen Flusty's (2000) work where he argues that these two different cities coexist and through unauthorized use of space, (re)create one another; in so doing these "coterminous worlds embed themselves within the flesh of the city and in the process, become that flesh" (Flusty 2000, 150). Rider exploration of the city highlights its ever changing fabric because there

are an infinite number of spots waiting to be ridden if only they were discovered. Indeed, Arron and I discussed the centrality of exploration within the street riding community. He excitedly told me about the spot that he and a group of his friends had “just found” in a construction site that was only a few blocks from his shop. He told me that it was a “great curved bank” that will be “gone” soon once the building had been constructed or a security guard hired.

As Arron’s story alludes to, and the title *Temporarily Permanent* suggests, the city is made up of a collection of spots that are just as easily lost as they are found, and riders often make it their mission to find the next great spot. In order to find that next spot, riders must move in unpredictable and nonproductive ways, which, as I argue above, actively (re)scripts the order of the city. *Fun* as opposed to profit is the priority in a BMX rider’s movement and understandings of order within the city. In fact, any attempt to stop riders from riding actively increases the value of those spaces to riders because it increases the challenge and thrill of trespassing. For example, “BMX Security Challenge in NYC” is a popular video series created by Billy Perry, one of the most famous BMX vloggers with over eight hundred thousand subscribers. On his channel there are four installments of these videos each with over one hundred thousand views and the highest at just over 1.5 million views. The purpose of these videos is for Billy and his friend Anthony Panza to go to the notoriously “high kick-out spots”, which are spots that are difficult to ride for long periods of time due to security or police presence. Of course, the pair already knows that they will get kicked out, but they do it anyway because it makes for an appealing video. Often these videos feature high traffic semi-public plazas in front of upscale business district office buildings and the two young men ride the spot until they are kicked out or get bored.



Figure 4.13 the thumbnail to Billy Perry's video *BMX Security Challenge in NYC 2*



Figure 4.14 the thumbnail to Billy Perry's video *BMX Security Challenge in NYC 3*

While not explicitly stated by the pair, the goal of these videos is to provoke and bait security and police who become the centerpiece of the thumbnail for these videos in figures 4.13 and 4.14. Often times Billy or Anthony will say to the camera how they see the security guard inside the building and that they will only have one shot at trying the trick. In their first ever BMX security challenge video, they continued to revisit a particular office building where an older white male security guard on duty was getting increasingly angry and hostile after telling the pair to leave several times, but the more the guard yelled the more the pair laughed. Possibly, racial and gender identity can have a bearing on how a guard reacts to riders. Do white males feel more entitled to reacting hostilely against younger riders whom they see as a threat to their

societal dominance? Do black men or women security guards react differently? I cannot answer these based on my research but they are worth considering.

In my talks with Arron, he cast this type of behavior, and specifically Billy's videos, in a very negative light that was bad for the sport. When his bike shop sponsors rides around the city he explained how he tries to minimize the disruption that he and his group causes in order to try to reshape the stereotype of rider being immature, disorderly, and disruptive young men into a more mature and respectful image (Phone Interview, Arron, 11/15/18). With that said, Arron did tell me that riders have been known to jump fences to get into skate parks that they aren't allowed to ride on, or parks that are under construction. One famous example of this is the Brooklyn Banks skate park which is one of the most famous skate parks in NYC that was closed down for construction but never reopened, yet riders continue to jump the fences to get in and ride (Phone Interview, Arron, 11/30/18). What is important to note, here, is the differences between YouTube representations of the sport and what most street riders actually are like. As my conversations with Arron suggest, most street riders are not trying to subvert the assumed order of the city. In fact, they aren't usually trying to cause any kind of disruption to others in the city. Rather, they are just trying to ride their bikes, and therefore, most riders utilize the growing number of skateparks in the city specifically designed for skate-boarders and riders. On the other hand, street riding videos, like Billy's, present a far more confrontational and overtly transgressive image of the sport by commonly highlighting violent interactions with security, daring stunts in public areas, and actively trying to be disruptive. However, disregarding boundaries, transgressing, is part of street BMX to varying degrees. Most riders do not balk at the idea of going where they aren't supposed to (As my discussion, above, with Arron about the Brooklyn Banks skate park suggests), but few are like Billy and his friends who actively seek out

confrontation in order to make enticing videos that attract viewers and make them a profit. What is undeniable about both riders like Billy and others is that fun is the primary goal.

We can see this goal of fun by watching videos of riders moving through the streets and how they inject small moments of fun into their journey as they dart through the city. For example, in *Street BMX Game of BIKE*, uploaded by Billy Perry, he and his friend, Stephon, are riding against New York City traffic on a busy street. As they are riding down the street filming each other with GoPro cameras strapped to their chest they both perform tricks in the street as they are riding along. At one point Billy hops in the air and does a barspin (turning your handlebars 360 degrees around while your front wheel is in the air) over a manhole cover, using the slight lip around the cover as a ramp to hop off. This casual use of street features as an architecture in order to have fun is pervasive in videos online as well as street BMX culture in general. In this way, riders do not move in a linear fashion or always with a set destination in mind, but rather react impulsively and opportunistically in order to prioritize “fun”. This haphazard movement happens at the macro and micro scales; whether the rider diverts his current course in the short term to perform a trick on a feature he just saw all while staying on course to the next spot, or making adjustments to his long term schedule as needed.



Figure 4.15 Animal BMX *BMX in New York City*. Rider goes up to smith grind the metal ledge in front of graffitied phrase “stay creative”

Colliding Worlds: Riders' Sense of Place

What, then, does this mean for riders' sense of place in a landscape that is constantly shifting, hazards jumping out in front of them, a pedestrian moving in an unexpected way, spots changing or disappearing, new spots being discovered, security giving them 'the boot'? A rider's sense of place is centered around a geography of rideable features, of famous spots, and of unexplored zones. However, riders' access to certain spaces is challenged because riders are often young adult men and sometimes people of color using space in unorthodox ways. Like people, places have multiple identities which, "can either be a source of richness or a source of conflict, or both" (Massey 1994, 153). Often, riders' interpretations and use of place is at odds with other city dwellers and authority figures, sometimes quiet dramatically. For example, in Austin Augie's video *Found the Spot* he and his friend, Ed, were "on a mission to find the spot that knocked out Rich Forne". The spot in question was a curved red metal bench on a busy street corner, that was made famous to the riding community when a local rider and video creator Rich Forne attempted to wall ride around it and fell off his bike, knocking himself out. Eventually the pair find it through word of mouth from other riders, and scouring a picture of it on their phones and seeing an identifiable sign in the background. When they arrive at the bench we see two people lounging on it, looking bewildered at the pair brandishing cameras and exclaiming excitedly that "this is it!" Augie says to Ed, "It's a lot more intimidating in person...so this is the legendary spot". The next shot is of Ed riding up onto the bench and the two laughing, followed by a quick cut to a young security guard from the building angrily confronting the two riders. The guard says "I am going to smack you in the face with that...I just told you about this...What'd you mean you ain't causing no ruckus? This is our property. You're causing damages. I just told you you cannot do that". Austin and Ed act like they are leaving

yelling back at the guard about how they don't understand his frustration. However, after the guard goes back inside, Austin turns the camera on himself and Ed saying "I'm going to ride this spot", which he does and the pair quickly ride away as the guard once again comes out of building.



Figure 4.16 Austin Augie in his video *Found the Spot* riding the curved bench that he saw Rich Forne knock himself out on

This example shows how places, spots, have a unique meaning to different groups and different people. This is of course obvious on the surface, however, BMX takes often banal spaces and romanticizes them by imbuing these places with mythologies of riders who have come before them. A bench like the one in the video thus becomes more than a bench. It becomes a proving ground for the rider's own masculinity and his riding prowess. The guard featured in the video reacted with anger and frustration to the rider's reading and use of the bench. "This is *our* property" (emphasis added) he says; to the guard, their use of space was an act of violence against his own authority as well as against the company that owns the space.

Places are more than just arbitrary and fixed boundaries in space, instead they “can be articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings” that are formed by, “networks of social relations and movements and communications in one’s head” (Massey 1994, 154). In this way “each ‘place’ can be seen as a particular, unique, point of their intersection. [Place] is indeed a *meeting place*” (Massey 1994, 154). The place of the bench in Austin’s video was thus constructed by a complex web of connections. The connection of Austin’s own understanding of that space from the perspective of his identity as a rider, as well as the perspective of that place from the point of view of the guard. This competing vision of place, this nexus of practiced identities (Duncan & Duncan 2010), of the guard (the embodiment of authority and order) and of the rider (the embodiment of childlike wonder), (re)create the meaning and place. Enforcing order, telling the rider ‘no’ effectively *made* the bench a meaningful space of resistance (Cresswell, 1996) for the riders, which in turn allowed for the transgression, and through riding it, and by imagining it as something else, they created new space and a new ‘sense of place’ for themselves and (through the video) for others.

The City (Re)Creates Street BMX

So far I have explored the ways in which street riders (re)make the city through editing and re-scripting the status quo. What is important to note is that while riders (re)create the landscape of the city, the city, in turn *creates* riders and street riding itself. This final section will show how the city (re)makes street riding in terms of 1) the physical landscape that it provides, 2) the way that the city markets itself as a “lived” and cultural space that is brimming with vitality, and 3) how street BMX videos generalize city spaces which in turn allows street BMX to be consumed and reproduced nearly anywhere in the world. What I must first explain is that without the built environment of the city, without a space to ride on, street riding would not exist in its current

form. As Iain Borden et al. (2001) explains about skateboarding: “This is not an activity which could take place in a medieval, renaissance, or early industrial city. It requires the smooth surfaces and running space of the paved, concrete world” (Borden et al. 2001, 13). Borden’s (2001) quote applies even more strongly to street riding because BMX began in the 1980s as an organized sport where riders would race around a dirt track with jumps and berms. This is usually referred to as BMX racing and has been an Olympic sport for quite some time now. Like any sport, BMX racing is organized by rules, it takes place on a specific track, and it is organized around notions of competition, athleticism, and morality (fair play, following rules, ‘being a good sport’, etc.). Street BMX, on the other hand, has no written rule book; nor does it have a very clear morality as riders in videos are seen trespassing, marking up property, injuring themselves, and getting into violent confrontations with security personnel. Furthermore, street riders are largely allowed to interpret the sport and the urban landscape in which they ride as they please, which a BMX racer cannot do in the same way; there is very little room for creative interpretations of a fixed track when racing against opponents and a clock. Bob Scerbo (2018) explores the differences of organized sports and street BMX in the forward of *Temporarily Permanent*, he writes:

I think that what makes [street] BMX so interesting is that the playing field changes daily, as opposed to those of traditional activities. The basketball court has been exactly the same my entire life. The players have gotten bigger, stronger, and faster, but the court does not evolve to meet these changes. Basketball is limited to its confines and its possibilities are dictated by that. BMX has no set rules... The spots already exist, it is just going to take the right person to come around and see their potential (Scerbo 2018)

Like the ephemeral nature of the city, street BMX changes and morphs all the time, as Scerbo explains. Without the city, including its spaces and the hegemonic order by which it is governed,

street riding as an anti-hegemonic transgressive force would not exist. Thus, the city and street riding co-create one another in a dialectical fashion.

While most of my argument has been centered around how the city is ordered to promote a capitalist system that benefits a select group of elites, the city is also a lived and cultural space. The city is marketed as a space where people can connect with one another in an artistic, vibrant, and even whimsical way. People travel to come to cities for their entertainment and cultural value. In fact, many city dwellers, if it isn't inconvenient, *want* to be entertained by playful engagement with the city by street performers, for example, who are generally perceived as a positive part of the city by those that live there. BMX YouTube videos capture this engagement with the city, and enhance it through editing and cinematography. For example, in one of Billy Perry's "security challenge" videos, he rides up the back of a lowered tow truck, using it as a ramp to jump off from. He lands several times in the busy street as his friend, Anthony, films him. A pair of city sanitation workers, as well as two security guards, watch his performance and turn to each other in exclamation of Billy's abilities. One of the security guards excitedly calls the pair over to show them the video that he took of the stunt on his phone. Here we see city officials, security personnel, and bystanders all marveling at Billy's counter-hegemonic use of space because it was not inconvenient for them. Rather, it was a welcomed, and playful, break from their daily patterns. However, the tow truck that allowed this exchange to occur is not unique to NYC where the video takes place.

Globalization of riding through video production

The scene described above could have taken place in nearly any other city that has tow trucks, and this rings true for most all other shots seen in street riding videos, which do not usually document specific spots that are unique to only one place; the landscape of the street riding

videos is largely unidentifiable to riders and non-riders alike. By often focusing on unidentifiable landscapes in the city or urban areas, riders are rendering the city itself interchangeable with any other city. Similar to the neoliberal city that reproduces generic landscapes, street riding videos reproduce the generic spaces of the city and broadcast them to a global audience. This audience then reproduces the riding and identities of the riders that they see in videos. To ride BMX you no longer need to ride in a city with a community of riders to teach you how to be a street rider. Rather, new riders can log-in to YouTube and join a global community of riders, and then reproduce the culture of riding that they see online where they live. In this way, the landscape that the neoliberal city has homogenized works to globalize street riding. However, there are exceptions to this because certain spots are instantly recognizable to the riding community.

While most of the scenes in BMX YouTube videos are of unidentifiable city and urban spaces, some scenes and videos work to mythologize certain famous riding spots. This is somewhat ironic because it is a foil of the neoliberal city itself, which seeks to homogenize landscapes to increase the capitalist accumulation of wealth and only allows for these special, “festival” marketplaces (examples include Faneuil Hall in Boston, Harbor Place in Baltimore, and South Street Seaport in New York) if they will be economically productive as spaces for leisure-based consumption (Harvey, 1989). We see versions of this festival marketplace in videos because some of the spots that riders film themselves in are identifiable to other BMX riders as well as other groups like skateboarders. Like festival marketplaces, these famous spots attract riders from all over the world to ride them. Traveling to these mythical spots is productive in affirming the rider’s prowess as a rider, and also imparts some of those mythical qualities of the spot onto the rider themselves. As recounted in the epigraph, one of the most famous spots, El Toro, is a set of twenty steps at El Toro high school in California. Riders, skaters, and even

mountain bikers have all attempted tricks at this spot. Due to the caliber of street riders that have attempted to ride this spot, the tricks that have been landed there, the injuries sustained, and the videos created this spot has taken on a mythical position within the BMX community.



Figure 4.17 Brandon Begin crashing on El Toro as seen in the video *DIG BMX: Hallowed Ground Ep. 2—El Toro*

For example, in figure 4.17, rider Brandon Begin crashes after attempting to land a trick on the stair set. This image was taken from a rider produced documentary on El Toro as part of the documentary series *Hallowed Ground*, produced by DIG BMX, which looks at famous spaces of street BMX. This video traces out the history of El Toro, all of the famous videos created there, the biggest crashes, and the most impressive tricks going back to the early 2000s. Spots can also be used to identify general regions in which a video might have taken place. Arron explained that metal cellar doors that open onto the sidewalk (sometimes called ‘bulkheads’) are common features in east coast street videos, while schools, like El Toro, are more common in west coast videos (Phone Interview, Arron, 11/30/18). The shots and spots that riders choose to include in

their videos all create a unique landscape that is different from the filmic landscapes we might see in mainstream films and TV shows. The landscape that riders create in their videos is therefore simultaneously generic and also laden with meaning.

Non-continuity editing is a key way that street riding videos challenge our conceptions of what the city looks like. As mentioned above, mainstream films and TV shows will often include *locating shots* (Lukinbeal, 2005) that are loaded with cultural symbolism that a particular audience can recognize and identify with, which helps this particular audience understand where the next scene will take place (Escher, 2006). Christopher Lukinbeal (2005) explains that landscape shots give “meaning to cinematic events and positions narratives within a particular scale and historical context. Where place and landscape ground action and the construction of meaning, space provides the stage for the story to unfold. Landscape and film are both social constructions that rely primarily on vision and perception for their very definition” (Lukinbeal 2005, 8). BMX videos also sometimes use locating shots of distinct cultural landscapes, like the NYC skyline, however they immediately challenge the mainstream conceptions of the order coded within that image by quickly cutting to a generic street corner, a plaza, or back ally with riders doing tricks. Riding videos juxtapose identifiable landscape, filled with notions of order, power, and the practice of the status quo with unidentifiable, generic landscapes being used in ways that challenge the hegemonic order of the city, which (re)creates the audiences’ understanding of the urban landscape. The use of generalized city spaces portrayed in riding videos helps to turn street riding into a global practice because we, as the audience, cannot tell where in the world this is happening. We can see this process taking place through the rise of smaller YouTube channels, the explosion of social media content on platforms like Instagram or Reddit, where independent riders easily share and document their riding to smaller audiences

than the much more popular YouTube channels that they are in some ways mimicking.

Unconventional editing and cinematography practices obfuscate the known landscape of the city, which allows it to take place nearly *anywhere*. Street riding videos reduce the city to the surfaces and spaces that the riders ride on and in, but these spaces are often not unique to the city they are filmed in. Thus, people do not need to live in cities to participate in street riding.

Generalizing the city landscape allows a globalized audience to consume and then reproduce street riding wherever they live. Ironically, as the neoliberal city seeks to homogenize the city landscape in order to serve middle-class tastes and promote efficient capital accumulation it has also paved the way for street riding to proliferate because street BMX does not need a *specific* place to exist; it is reproducible nearly anywhere. However, certain spaces take on a mythical identity for riders; like El Toro discussed above. These spaces are *productive* to riders that attempt tricks here because even if they crash, they will cement their legacy within the riding community. In this way, they impart the mythical qualities of the spot itself as well as the other riders who attempted tricks there before them. Spots like El Toro are not traditionally productive, yet are the foil of the ‘festival marketplaces’ within the neoliberal city.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis has been to understand how street BMX riders *reveal* the production of the neoliberal city that is organized around capital accumulation for a select few. BMX riders challenge this spatial enforced order simply by utilizing that space in unconventional ways. BMX riders' transgressive actions disrupt the status quo and subvert the hegemonic power and order of the city. Through this subversion the riders work to both edit and (re)script the city. However, the city also acts upon street riders and (re)produces street BMX on a global scale. Platforms such as YouTube and the proliferation of mobile video have aided in the homogenization of certain city landscape, which thus allows non-city dwellers to relate to the landscape that they see in videos and reproduce the street riding that they view where ever they live. Ironically, much like the globalized landscape of the post-modern city, street BMX has become a globalized sport.

Much has been written on transgressive and counter-hegemonic groups that, like street BMX, subvert the hegemonic order of the city. However, my research offers new insights into this process by considering how riders (re)script the order of the city, what role platforms like YouTube play in the globalization of the sport, and how the city itself has (re)produced street riding. Considering platforms, like YouTube, as valuable sources of ethnographic data is important because these online videos offer a glimpse into how riders create these videos, view, interact with, and spread the street BMX. Online videos act as a means of bringing new riders to the sport because these videos attract massive attention with the most popular videos and YouTube channels amassing millions of views and large numbers of channel subscribers. Street riders who do not have access to the sport through in-person communities utilize these videos as a means to gain access to the community. These channels offer street riders the ability to feel a

part of a group through selling branded clothing, bike accessories, and other merchandise. In this way, the creation of online spaces and communities becomes increasingly important when considering the “real-world” creation of spaces.

However, my work here has many ways in which it can be expanded upon. First and foremost, I believe engaging with more “average” riders; that is to say, riders who do not promote themselves through YouTube channels or other social media sites would be essential. Including more insights from these riders would expand the scope of my research to, possibly, unearth more details about how the majority of riders perceive and practice the sport. Furthermore, expanding the pool of riders included in this research could potentially reveal key demographic trend differences between riders seen in YouTube videos and the race, class, ethnicity of the broader community of riders. In general, I found that most riders that I saw in videos were white young men, with a few people of color making an appearance. This perhaps suggests that the riders that make it to the forefront of the community, and who are “allowed” to be seen on a global stage, are young white males with a privileged racial, class, and gender status. Finally, a more detailed approach to the role of the *bike* in the BMX rider’s movement and use of space is needed to more fully understand this topic. The bike is a key object in street BMX and has a distinct lineage as a mode of acceptable transportation through city spaces. However, used in this context, the bike in the form of a street BMX bike is considered a subversive, childlike, toy. These additional paths of inquiry would offer an excellent continuation of my research.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Interview Questions

Rider Questions:

1. How did you get involved with BMX riding? How long have you been riding BMX?
2. What places do you know that are high “kick out” spots around the city? In general, how do you feel non-BMX riders view the BMX community?
3. Have you ever made a spot better to ride by cleaning it (sweeping away debris), moving objects, bringing in outside materials to make a spot better to ride, waxing a rail, or any other form of changing the spot?
4. What do you enjoy most about BMX?
5. What would make BMX riding in the City better for you as a rider?
6. Do you find that businesses or the City make alterations to spots that riders often use to make the spot harder or dangerous to ride? Do any of these changes to spots you used to ride, or that are popular riding spots, stop you or others from riding them?
7. Do you participate in BMX related social media on YouTube, Instagram, twitter, or Facebook? If you do, what do you enjoy about watching other riders online and how does it influence your riding, if at all? Do you subscribe to any BMX content producers on YouTube, Instagram, or Facebook?
8. Do you primarily ride in the streets or in designated skate parks? Do you ever run into issues riding in skate parks (with other park users or cops/security)?
9. How do you find places in the street to ride (Social media, word of mouth, exploration)?
10. What is the best part about riding in the street? What is the best part about riding in a skate park?
11. What would make you stop riding in the street, if anything, and instead ride only in specially designed skate parks?
12. Do you ride alone or with a group?
13. Do you ever film or take pictures of yourself or your friends riding? Do you share the video or pictures online?

Shop Owner/Manager Questions:

1. What is BMX culture like here in the City? Is the culture and amount of riders growing here?
2. What would make BMX riding better in the City?
3. How do you as a shop help promote that culture (Events, promotions, out reach, etc.)
4. Do you think street riders give BMX a bad name? Or are they a valuable part of the culture?
5. Is it hard as a business to support a sport that often times is seen as a renegade or counter culture group?
6. What is appealing to people about BMX riding?